Google Search 2010: A Mid Year Report Card

Google's stellar financial performance means that Google is thriving in a dicey economic climate. For Google competitors in search and content processing, Google's money gusher translates to Google's push into the enterprise without the kind of furrowed brows that incumbents sport.

The economics of Google's advertising machine are becoming almost predictable. Cash fuels frequent, continuous innovation, often without a discernible pattern. Competitors are used to Google's announcing new functionalities to both Google Docs and Gmail. Google Docs provides better formatting options with a margin ruler, improved numbering and bullets and more options for image placement.

Spreadsheets now have a formula editing bar, cell auto-complete, drag- and-drop columns and more. Google has also added a new drawings editor to Google Docs, which may make Microsoft's Visio product manager lose some sleep. Within Google Docs you can build flow charts collaboratively. Gmail now sports a new nested label feature and the ability to drag and drop attachments.

In the larger information processing markets, the Google method was at first disruptive. Five or six years ago, the Google Search Appliance (somewhat confusingly named “GSA”) was a novelty. In the GSA's infancy, "baby" version of the Google search system cost less than $2,500. Today, the price is higher, and the Google cheerleading is another background noise in enterprise search procurement.

Ask an enterprise user about search and the answer is something along the lines of "I want search to work just like Google." Google will not reveal how many GSAs have been sold. I have heard estimates that range from 20,000 to as many as 60,000 units at client locations. Presumably someone in a cubicle at Google has the "number", but the Google way is inscrutable silence.

Today, search and retrieval is as unstable as wine on a harried waiter's serving tray.

The intersection of an organization's information needs, a GSA, and original code that makes use of Google Application Programming Interfaces is a useful combination in the hands of a savvy information technology professional. Google and a small number of other search vendors have adapted to some interesting changes in enterprise information access.

First, in house information professionals want a combination of easy deployment and a bunch of knobs and dials to turn in order to deliver search-enabled applications. (The GSA offers about four knobs; other vendors offer scores of knobs plus buttons and sliders to set.)

Second, the users expect a search box, which means an actual search box or information that "just appears" automagically, preferably without too much mousing around.

Third, even the lawyers and accountants know that appropriately priced systems information access is essential. Organizations are wading in mud on the shore of a rapidly expanding lake of digital information. A misstep can be expensive, embarrassing, or financially burdensome.

In this shift, what has happened to the Google Search Appliance? The answer is that the GSA is now complemented by a wider range of Google components. Each component has search DNA, but these complements add important capabilities to Google's enterprise search line up. The analogy is that a basketball team finds itself with two LeBron James.

Let me highlight the Google enterprise search line up as we wind closer to the end of 2010. Google does not package its products and services as I group them, preferring to scatter information like pieces in a big puzzle.

The surprising news was the roll out of Google Commerce Search (GCS). Most organizations know that Google can search a Web site without charge or, if there is a fee, it is a bargain. The GCS focuses on the retail side of a company's business. You can begin your education about this new search service at http://www.google.com/commercesearch/. In a nutshell, for $50,000 a year--a price that varies by number of stocking units or items for sale--you get a cloud-based eCommerce system. Keep in mind that if you own a Google Search Appliance, the systems are separate. The benefits of this product include seamless scaling to handle peak traffic, special product promotion functions, and advanced reporting and analysis, among others. Endeca's eCommerce system has been a strong contender in the enterprise retail search space. Like Google's industrial strength email service, built on Gmail and the Postini systems, GCS is a cloud play.

The second key development has been Google's steady stream of integration and application programming interface activity. An API is a method used by one program to allow it communicate with another program. On the integration front, Google continues to add partners. With each passing month, Google calibrates its partner program. From the relatively loose approach taken a year ago, today's partner program is stringent. Among the partners available to assist organizations are Appirio, Atlassian, and Manymoon, among others. A full line up of partners is available at http://code.google.com/googleapps/campfire.html.

The APIs themselves now number in the hundreds, but I have not been able to locate a comprehensive list. For the enterprise sector, there is a secure data connector, a provisioning API, a code block to implement a single sign-on, and an eMail migration API. There are three ways to keep track of Google's APIs. I have signed up for the Google Apps Developer Blog, which often yields some tasty code McNuggets. Next, I track postings and content in Google Apps at this url, http://code.google.com. Google posts some useful information on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/user/GoogleDevelopers.

After entering API in the search box, I click across the tabs at the top of the page; for example, Google Code Web site and Google Code Groups. Third, I navigate to Google's official YouTube channel at http://www.youtube.com/user/Google and I run a query for enterprise and then a separate query for APIs. The new videos are easy to spot. In the last six

months, Google has done an arguably better job disseminating information via its YouTube channel than in its blogs and "official" documentation.

Third, Google's enterprise application "marketplace" continues to grow. If you have not visited this outlet, go to Google.com and enter the query Google Apps Marketplace in the search box. The first link is to this store. You can take a quick look at the products, which includes a number of categories. I start with the entries for "enterprise search" and do some clicking and scanning. What is surprising is that Google has yet to provide a seamless, integrated way to locate useful information about its enterprise services.

What is in the future? My research for my 2007 study, which is still in print, Google Version 2.0 described the method by which Google can deliver most if not all of the GSA's functions via the cloud. My view is that by the end of 2010, an enterprise will be able to "hook" together various functions, including some of the third-party indexing features of the GSA with Google's cloud services. Full integration and a 100 percent cloud solution lies in the future. But more integration seems highly likely.

Instead of integrating Microsoft Exchange content with business intelligence data from Cognos, to name two supported third party systems, an enterprise will have more integration options that essentially "snap in." Until Google productizes these code components, an authorized Google integrator like Adhere Solutions can mesh various Google components today.

The challenge Google poses to competitors and prospects is the speed with which it moves. After 11 successful years, Google delights in making customers crack the Google code. I for one think Google has some work to do in making its wealth of products, services, and resources more easily findable. In the meantime, buckle down and explore Google. The payoff makes the effort worthwhile in many situations.

And Google’s mid-year grade? B+ and improving.

Stephen E Arnold, May 3, 2010

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